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LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [QA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)  
SUBJECT: DAS GRAY'S DECEMBER 1 MEETING WITH AL JAZEERA  
MANAGING DIRECTOR

REF: DOHA 1593

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer, reasons 1.4 (b&d)

1. (C) Summary: DAS Gray met with Al Jazeera Managing Director Wadah Khanfar December 1 in Doha. Topics discussed included the Daily Mirror story alleging President Bush considered bombing Al Jazeera offices in Doha; USG concerns about Al Jazeera's professionalism, and possible cooperation in the field of journalist exchanges with the USG. Khanfar also made a plea for senior USG appearances on Al Jazeera and for USG support in re-opening Al Jazeera's Baghdad bureau. End summary.

#### The Daily Mirror Story

2. (C) DAS Gray met with Khanfar December 1 at the Al Jazeera offices in Doha. Also attending the meeting were Al Jazeera Deputy Chief Editor Ayman Gaballah, NEA/ARPI Desk Officer Shawn Thorne and PAO Mirembé Nantongo. The meeting took place upon Khanfar's return from a trip to London, where he had sought without success an appointment with Prime Minister Blair concerning the leaked classified memo allegedly containing indications that President Bush considered bombing Al Jazeera's Doha headquarters in April 2004. Khanfar raised the issue at the start of the meeting, telling DAS Gray humorously that Al Jazeera had not been sure that the meeting with DAS Gray should be held at AJ offices "for your own safety." DAS Gray responded by noting that the White House dismissed the story, as had Prime Minister Blair. Such allegations cannot be taken seriously, he said. The USG has its differences with Al Jazeera, stemming from the latter's lack of professionalism, but Administration officials do appear on Al Jazeera - which also has a long-established bureau in Washington - and the US is a strong supporter of freedom of the press.

3. (C) "We want to know the truth, we need either denial or confirmation," said Khanfar. He said the story has generated "panic, speculation and suspicion" among Al Jazeera staffers and has created an uncomfortable environment. The effect has also been material, said Khanfar, claiming that landlords of Al Jazeera bureaus overseas are now looking askance at their tenants, and that insurance companies have been reconsidering their premiums. "I myself have suspended judgment until I know for sure that the discussion took place," said Khanfar. (Note: The story, and speculation concerning its veracity or lack thereof, continues to play in the local press, most recently as a result of a December 10 seminar co-hosted in Doha by Al Jazeera and the Qatar Red Crescent Society on the role of journalists in enhancing respect for human rights. Khanfar was a speaker at the conference and repeated his call for "the truth about the memo." The seminar received wide local coverage. End note.) Khanfar then referred to incidents in the past when coalition forces accidentally struck Al Jazeera offices in Baghdad and Kabul. "There was no proper investigation, no apology, no-one said anything," he complained, adding that whenever any other news service in Iraq or Afghanistan suffered damage or injury to its premises or staff they received some sort of message of acknowledgement/condolence from coalition authorities.

#### Concern over Al Jazeera's journalistic practices

4. (C) DAS Gray then moved on to reiterate the list of USG concerns over Al Jazeera's lack of professionalism. Khanfar responded at length that Al Jazeera is not "anti-US" and does not espouse any kind of "anti-US editorial policy", upon which DAS Gray pointed out that USG concerns center on Al Jazeera's journalistic practices and not on whether the station is anti- or pro-US. "We are not asking Al Jazeera to become a tool of the US Government; what we are asking for is its professionalism," said Gray. Khanfar went on to note that, contrary to popular belief, Al Jazeera has never broadcast tapes showing beheadings. He said he also believed that Arab intelligence services are working against Al Jazeera in an attempt to discredit it for their own purposes, without specifying in what way he believed these services operate against Al Jazeera.

## Al Jazeera-USG Cooperation?

15. (C) DAS Gray then asked Khanfar for his thoughts on possible USG/Al Jazeera cooperation, specifically in the area of boosting Al Jazeera's professionalism. DAS Gray described the International Visitor program implemented by the USG all over the world and asked if Khanfar felt AJ journalists might benefit from such a program. Khanfar acquiesced immediately. He said many AJ journalists have "a very generalized picture of America." A visit to the United States would certainly help them appreciate "the complexity" of American society, particularly with regard to decision-making apparatus of the U.S. Government and would correct "the perceptual filter" currently in place, he said. (Note: In a December 7 discussion with PAO on the same theme, AJ Chief Editor Ahmed Sheikh, who himself participated in an IV program in 1984, also welcomed the idea, noting that a stint in a US television newsroom would be very beneficial to AJ journalists and producers. End note.) Khanfar also noted that a group of U.S. journalists would be welcome to spend a week or so in the Al Jazeera newsroom.

## What AJ wants from the USG

16. (C) Khanfar also reiterated two familiar themes, asking for more senior USG officials to appear on Al Jazeera and for support for the re-opening of AJ's Baghdad bureau. "We are not hoping for Donald Rumsfeld, but it has been a long time since Secretary Rice was on Al Jazeera," he said. He noted President Bush's recent appearance on Al Arabiyya, which Al Jazeera viewed as sending a pointed message to Al Jazeera: "the message to Al Jazeera of exclusion was clear." Khanfar also asked for USG support in re-opening the Al Jazeera bureau in Baghdad. The Iraq dossier has two key elements, he said, the security aspect and the political aspect. Al Jazeera is able to cover the security aspect using non-Al Jazeera journalists on the ground and footage from wire services, but it is next to impossible to cover the political aspect effectively from a distance. "During the last year, security has become an overwhelming part of things. But coverage of the political side is needed," Khanfar said. He added that Al Jazeera recently received a visit from senior Iraqi Shi'a representative Abdel Aziz Al Hakim, of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, who in the past vehemently refused to consider the possibility of re-opening the Al Jazeera Baghdad bureau (reftel). Al Hakim was more conciliatory during his recent visit, said Khanfar, and broached the possibility of cooperation with Al Jazeera. Khanfar said he made no promises, given that Al Jazeera cannot have special arrangements with any political elements and is waiting to see what transpires.

UNTERMEYER